

From Feathered Humans to Feitian (Flying Deities): A Brief Analysis of the Expressive Path of the Motive of “Flight” under the Transformation of Mythical Art

Yuhan Jin

*Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China
3552814836@qq.com*

Abstract. In traditional mythological art, the imagery of “flight” embodies ancient humans’ romantic imagination and idealized vision of transcending the mundane world and soaring freely. Its expression of dynamic momentum carries unique aesthetic value and cultural connotation. However, existing studies have primarily focused on the symbolic meaning of “flight” or on comparative analyses of immortal figures in Chinese and Western traditions, while systematic and in-depth studies on the dynamic aesthetics of “flight” in mythological art remain insufficient. By tracing the evolution of imagery from feathered humans to Feitian (flying deities), and examining three distinctive dimensions—“controlling motion through line,” “creating momentum through color,” and “evoking rhythm through space”—this study reveals the unique artistic techniques and striking dynamic aesthetic features manifested in Chinese art’s representation of the momentum of “flight.”

Keywords: Mythological art, Feathered humans, Feitian, Developmental process, Dynamic aesthetic expression

1. Introduction

In ancient Chinese art and social life, the concept of “flight” has consistently been a central image representing the transcendence of reality and the communication between heaven and humans. Whether in life, desiring to escape earthly existence and ascend to immortality to attain freedom and an ideal life, or after death, hoping for the soul’s resurrection and ascent to heaven, yearning for eternal life, the aspiration of “ascending to immortality” has remained an indelible human wish. From Neolithic painted pottery and bronzes adorned with bird motifs symbolizing power and divinity, to the romantic imagination expressed in Chu Ci—“Riding the steed to gallop, I shall reach the path ahead”—“flight” represents not merely physical movement from earth to sky but also humanity’s yearning for spiritual freedom, which underpins the veneration of immortals. Jing Liu has noted: “Daoist thought flourished during the Han dynasty. At that time, it was believed that a person with feathers could ascend to immortality. As Chong Wang states in Lunheng·Lei Xu: ‘All who fly have wings; objects without wings that fly are called immortals. In depicting the form of immortals, wings are created for them.’ This may constitute the earliest description in Chinese thought of feathered humans ascending to immortality.” [1] Therefore, feathered humans served as

an early concrete expression of people's ideal of ascending to immortality. Through their divine appearance, winged forms, and associated cultural connotations, they established the primitive paradigm for representing the dynamic momentum of "flight" in Chinese art.

2. The developmental process and evolution of feathered human imagery

The figure of the winged being appears in diverse forms among the numerous extant works of art, providing invaluable visual material for exploring the evolution of its morphology and the depiction of the kinetic energy inherent in 'flight'. This analysis uses a series of specific examples to examine the physical characteristics of winged beings across different periods, and how artistic techniques were employed to convey the dynamic beauty of 'flight'.

2.1. Lacquered Wooden Painted Feathered Human on a Toad-Seat Phoenix (Spring and Autumn–warring States Period)



Figure 1. Lacquered Wooden Painted Feathered Human on a Toad-Seat Phoenix [2]

The “Lacquered Wooden Painted Feathered Human on a Toad-Seat Phoenix” was excavated from Tomb No. 2 of the Warring States Chu in Tianxingguan, Jingzhou, Hubei Province, and is currently preserved at the Jingzhou Museum. The sculpture stands approximately 65.7 cm tall. The body is coated with black lacquer as a base and decorated with red, yellow, and blue patterns. The wooden sculpture consists of three sections from top to bottom: the feathered human, the phoenix, and the toad. The central phoenix stands atop the toad with a poised, vigorous posture. Its neck is long and slender, wings and tail feathers spread wide, tail elongated and flowing, and wings full and layered, giving the impression of imminent flight. The toad at the base of the sculpture is corpulent, facing upwards, with robust limbs firmly squatting on the ground, presenting a stable stance. Its body is decorated with red patterns; the surface texture is intricate and detailed, and the form lifelike. The sculpture as a whole is proportionally harmonious, conveying a sense of balance and stability, with natural transitions between the components, forming a complete and unified artistic image.

The feathered human, standing 33.6 cm tall, has a human head and body with bird-like feet, perching on the phoenix. The posture is light and graceful. Its hair is arranged in a high topknot; the mouth is shaped like a bird's beak, and the eyes are slightly closed. The body bears luxuriant wings, painted in multiple colors with intricate shapes and hues, curving naturally; the arm feathers are

relatively sparse; the leg feathers are arranged in tight, circular, scale-like patterns with varied distribution; the back feathers are most abundant and clearly layered, with the uppermost feathers extending beyond the body like a cloak, fitting the body's curves and forming a streamlined silhouette that conveys a sense of ethereal lightness and agility.

This lacquered wooden painted phoenix-feathered human (Figure 1) vividly reflects the characteristics of Chu lacquerware, imbued with romantic mythological color. However, although the feathered human is equipped with wings at this stage, the dynamic momentum of “flight” remains relatively weak.

2.2. Bronze Feathered Human (Western Han Dynasty)



Figure 2. Western Han Bronze Feathered Human excavated from Nanyufeng Village, Xi'an, Shaanxi [3]

The “Bronze Feathered Human” was excavated from the Han Chang'an City site in Nanyufeng Village, Xi'an, Shaanxi, and is also known as the “Western Han Round-Relief Bronze Feathered Human.” The figure is depicted in a kneeling posture, with the body slightly leaning forward. Its head is comparatively large, creating a striking contrast with its slender body. The hair is styled in a high topknot, and the facial features are unusually rendered: ears protruding above the top of the head, eyes wide open, prominent cheekbones, and the corners of the mouth slightly upturned as if smiling. The topknot tilts slightly backward, evoking a mysterious and uncanny effect. The overall design of the bronze feathered human exhibits smooth dynamic lines and stable form, conveying a sense of calm serenity while simultaneously appearing light and ethereal.

Although the bronze feathered human is portrayed in a static kneeling position, its torso leans forward slightly, and the back feathers rise and flare, creating a strong impression of potential “flight” and full dynamic momentum.

2.3. Feathered Human Controlling a Dragon (Western Han Dynasty)



Figure 3. Western Han Mural at Xi'an University of Technology [4]

The “Feathered Human Controlling a Dragon” was excavated from the rear wall of a Western Han mural tomb at Xi'an University of Technology (Qujiang Campus), Shaanxi. The mural depicts a feathered human riding a dragon, with a yellow serpent and a green serpent beneath. Warm earthy tones such as ochre and sienna dominate the palette, with black lines defining the contours, and bright yellow and aqua blue serving as accent colors. The overall style is both rustic and mysterious, imbued with a sense of romanticism.

The figure in the painting has a human head and body. It is standing sideways with both hands firmly grasping a dragon in front of it. Leaning forward with dynamic momentum, it appears to be soaring swiftly while controlling the dragon. Its head and shoulders are covered in feathers. The uniquely crown-like feathered adornment encircles the topknot in a streamlined manner. The delicate, flowing feather lines appear to sway in the wind, conveying a sense of lightness and elegance. The feathers on the shoulders and back form the focal point of the composition. Near the neck, the feathers are arranged in circular, scale-like patterns that are both orderly and staggered. These patterns extend downwards along the back, resembling elongated, flowing bird wings. These lines are both fluid and taut, evoking the sensation of feathers billowing in the wind as the figure propels the dragon forward. The waist feathers are simple and streamlined, fanning outwards and downwards while tapering to pointed tips with subtle curves that enhance the dynamic effect. In contrast, the arm feathers are less prominent, shorter and hugging the contours of the arms more closely. They gradually thin and become sparser from the shoulder to the hand, achieving a lifelike appearance.

In this mural, the head and back feathers rise with the wind, and the forward-leaning body emphasizes the sensation of flight, conveying an intense sense of dynamic motion.

2.4. Yingchengzi Han Tomb Mural (Eastern Han Dynasty)



Figure 4. Mural from the Yingchengzi Han Tomb [4]

The Yingchengzi Han Tomb mural was excavated from the north wall of the main chamber of Tomb No. 2 in Yingchengzi, Jin County, Liaoning Province, and is also known as the “Ascension Mural.” The scene depicts feathered humans assisting the tomb owner in ascending to immortality. In the upper left corner of the mural, a feathered human, stepping on auspicious clouds and holding sacred herbs, approaches to guide the tomb owner’s ascent. The body of the feathered human is outlined in black lines, with feathers delineated in warm tones such as ochre, creating a clear and vivid depiction.

The feathered human leans slightly forward with the head lightly tilted and raised. The hair is arranged in a topknot, and a beard hangs from the chin. The legs are positioned in a staggered stance, one forward and one back, and the body is entirely covered in feathers. Curled feathers rise from the top of the head, extending backward and upward like antennae, flowing naturally in the wind; the lines are smooth and graceful, with feathers closely integrated with the topknot. Shoulder and back feathers are richly layered, long, dense, and orderly; the upper feathers flutter backward with the wind, extending from the shoulders to the waist. Feathers on the waist and limbs are shorter, dense, and follow the skin’s texture, arranged neatly like a feathered garment, creating a lively yet light effect. The calf feathers are softer and finer than those on the thighs, with intricate patterns extending down to the tops of the feet.

Compared with the Western Han, the Eastern Han murals demonstrate more mature development: the use of line is more skilled, fluid yet varied in thickness and intensity, creating distinct layers and a rhythmic composition. The feathered human stepping on auspicious clouds further emphasizes the sense of “flight.”

2.5. Immortals Playing Liubo Stone Relief (Eastern Han Dynasty)



Figure 5. Liubo Stone Relief of Immortals [5]

The “Immortals Playing Liubo” relief was excavated from a cliff tomb in Xinjin, Sichuan, dating to the Eastern Han. The scene comprises a pair of feathered humans playing liubo (a board game), the liubo board, wine vessels, and auspicious phoenixes.

These feathered figures have distinctive features: pointed ears, deep-set eyes, a high-bridged nose and slender eyebrows. Their facial contours are simple yet expressive. They kneel on either side of the willow panel, slender and light in form. The figure on the left extends both hands as if speaking, while the figure on the right raises both hands above its head in celebration. Both figures convey a sense of movement. Their bodies are covered in feathers. The feathers on their heads are slightly curled, adding depth and vitality. The feathers on their arms follow the contours of their limbs — short, light and flowing with varied spacing. The shoulder feathers cascade downwards, drifting backwards with the body's movement, conveying lightness and fluidity. The feathers on their chests and abdomens form semicircular scales. The leg feathers align with the limb structure and gradually stiffen and shorten in orderly rows as they move downwards.

“The images of feather men figure in Han paintings dispelled people's fear of death and provided spiritual comfort for the living.” [6] For the Han people, feathered humans or immortals were objects of widespread belief, with the central concern being “longevity.” This is why the “Immortals Playing Liubo” imagery depicts an ascension ritual, with feathered humans, auspicious signs, and sacred herbs as essential elements. By merging romantic mythological elements with local cultural features, the mural expresses Eastern Han religious reflections on divinity, life and death, and ascension.

2.6. Summary

From the Spring and Autumn–Warring States period to the Eastern Han, these examples systematically trace the evolution of feathered human imagery. “In summary, the immortal realm in which the feather men figure in Han paintings are located contains both Taoist immortal thought and Confucian ethical principles. In this way, the Confucian and Taoist schools not only integrated in concept, but also in form, ultimately forming the body language characteristics of the feather men figures in Han paintings, which are both elegant and heavy, dynamic and profound.” [6] During the Spring and Autumn–Warring States period, most sculptures depict static feathered humans, subtly implying “flight” through intricate feather carvings. By the Han dynasty, feathered humans on stone reliefs are no longer merely seated or standing; they become immortals capable of “guiding souls to

the heavens” at the side of the Queen Mother of the West. The dynamic momentum of “flight” evolves from static suggestion to active depiction, completing the narrative transition from “potential ascension” to “dynamic flight.” This evolution not only reflects Han funeral ideology of “viewing death as life” and Daoist thought on “guiding souls to immortality,” but also demonstrates the creative expression of flight momentum in Chinese art through techniques such as forward-leaning postures, feather depiction, and layered symbolic imagery. These methods laid the foundational paradigm for the later Feitian imagery, including the use of S-shaped curves and fluttering ribbons, characteristic of dynamic aesthetic expression.

3. The development and evolution of Feitian

If the feathered human represents the emotional embodiment of people’s ideal of “ascension,” then the Feitian (Flying Apsara) images from the Sixteen Kingdoms to the Yuan dynasty are products of social transformation and cultural integration during these periods. From the “divine flight” of Indian Buddhist protectors to the “earthly soaring” of secular music and dance in central China, the evolution of Feitian imagery and the dynamic momentum of “flight” serve as key threads reflecting the spirit of the era and the development of aesthetic ideals. The transformation from “divine solemnity” to “earthly grace” in form, and from “dynamic suggestion” to “realized movement” in flight, together construct the vivid and tangible imagery of Chinese Feitian.

3.1. Feitian Mural, North Wall, Niche 12, Cave 169, Bingling Temple, Yongjing, Linxia (Western Qin)



Figure 6. Feitian Mural, Cave 169, Niche 12, Bingling Temple, Yongjing, Linxia [7]

The above Feitian mural is from the north wall, niche 12, of Cave 169 at Bingling Temple, Yongjing County, dating to the Western Qin period of the Sixteen Kingdoms. The overall composition uses an ochre base, outlined with ink lines in the Chinese baimiao (line-drawing) technique. Garments and other decorative elements are filled with flat applications of three greens and ochre, resulting in a bright yet harmonious color scheme. The line work varies in thickness, with rhythmic emphasis on key features. Huiran Zhang describes the Feitian figures of this period as follows: “These Feitian generally have round faces, large ears, straight noses, large downcast eyes; the upper body is half-naked, the waist wrapped in a long skirt, with a halo behind the head. Both form and makeup are relatively simple, forming a distinctive ‘small-face’ appearance.” [8]

The mural conveys the dynamic momentum of flight through the body’s curved posture and the flow of garments. The Feitian body is slightly rotated in the direction of flight; one hand is held at

the chest, the other extends backward; garments flow upward and backward; feet extend naturally behind, presenting a wind-driven flying posture. Silk ribbons drape from the shoulders and arms, one end wrapped around the hand, the remainder fluttering backward in the air. The long skirt is lifted and fanned outward by the flight motion.

During this period, the sense of “flight” is primarily expressed through body posture and fluid curves. The movement of the garments is comparatively weak, giving the overall figure a somewhat stiff impression. The “V”-shaped body posture produces a sense of downward pull, lacking lightness and the ethereal, hovering quality. The ribbons fail to convey fluttering, resulting in a relatively weak overall sense of flight.

3.2. Feitian, Cave 248, Dunhuang (Northern Wei)



Figure 7. Feitian, Cave 248, Dunhuang [9]

The flying apsaras murals in Dunhuang Cave 248 date back to the Northern Wei period. Compared to the early Northern Wei murals (see Figure 16), those from the middle and late Northern Wei periods feature softer, more harmonious colours. This marks a departure from the bold, blocky and flat colour application of earlier works. The lines became more refined and precise, employing a delicate yet forceful iron-wire contour technique. The flying apsaras became more diverse in form and the scenes became increasingly intricate.

This mural emphasises the sensation of flight through abundant flowing ribbons. The figures of the apsaras grew more distinctly feminine, characterised by slender, elongated bodies and sideways flight. Their bodies form elegant S-curves, conveying lightness and agility. Their hair is coiled into high buns and their faces are elongated with arched brows, large eyes, high cheekbones and small mouths. Their overall facial features exhibit relaxed, harmonious expressions, retaining Han-dynasty stylistic elements [10]. Most celestial beings are depicted with bare torsos and slender limbs, and their heads, necks and upper bodies are adorned with ornaments. Their long robes cling to the body and extend backwards. The number and length of the ribbons around their shoulders and arms increases, flowing backwards against the direction of flight to create a sense of propulsion.

During the Northern Wei period, the dynamic momentum of 'flight' became increasingly agile and was conveyed through the flowing lines of ribbons, which expressed a vivid sense of movement.

3.3. Feitian, Cave 320, Mogao Caves (High Tang)



Figure 8. Feitian, Cave 320, Mogao Caves [7]

The mural above originates from Cave 320 of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang and dates back to the High Tang period. It is also known as the 'Four Divine Figures of Flying Apsaras in the High Tang Era'. The mural features a predominantly green background, creating a bright and vivid colour scheme. The composition is symmetrical: two central flying apsaras hold trays in one hand and scatter flowers with the other, leaning slightly backwards, while winged maidens on either side extend both arms forward as if in pursuit. The lines are delicate yet powerful, the composition is rich and the visual rhythm is intense.

Their dynamic poses and exceptionally long, flowing ribbons primarily convey the sensation of flight. All four figures are adorned with luxurious, exquisite accessories. Their upper bodies are bare, and they wear long gowns around their waists with ribbons draped over their shoulders. The gowns feature four-petalled floral patterns. The celestial beings have rounded faces with faint smiles and full yet graceful figures. They move with vitality and ethereal lightness. The ribbons draped over their shoulders twist into sinuous S-curves behind them, curling and billowing in the direction of their flight. Their slender silhouettes, fluid motions and long, flowing ribbons accentuate the sensation of flight even further.

“Dunhuang flying Apsaras experienced a prosperous phase during the Sui and Tang dynasties, which was due to the strong cultural self-esteem of the period faith, rich spiritual pursuits and strong socio-economic foundation.” [10]. In terms of technique, line modeling, and depiction of movement, Tang Feitian attained unprecedented levels. “In this period, the image of the flying sky has been surpassed the influence of the Western Regions gradually turned into a completely Chinese image. Holding hibiscus flowers is Dunhuang, which Li Bai also praised Flying Fairy, step lightly into space, dancing in the Sky” [10]. The length of ribbons on the shoulders and arms increased, and their curving shapes were deliberately used to express the momentum of flight, creating a composition rich in rhythm.

3.4. Flower-Scattering Child Feitian, Cave 97, Mogao Caves (Western Xia)



Figure 9. Flower-Scattering Child Feitian, Cave 97, Mogao Caves [11]

The image above is from Cave 97, Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, dating to the Western Xia period, also called the “Flower-Scattering Child Feitian.” The mural depicts a child Feitian performing a handstand while scattering flowers. The overall palette is bright and vivid, dominated by ochre and stone green, conveying vitality. The line work is vigorous and precise, and the figure’s movements are depicted accurately and fluidly.

The sense of flight is conveyed through the child Feitian’s backward-extended legs and the flowing ribbons. The child wears a jeweled crown and small braids, a leopard-patterned short garment, red boots, a red forehead cord, and a red sash around the waist. The figure is short and stocky, with emphasis on the powerful thighs, diverging from the slender, graceful female forms of earlier Feitian, resembling instead the charming, robust figures often seen in New Year prints. Jewelry adorns the arms; one hand holds a tray, the other scatters flowers. Auspicious clouds surround the figure, and ribbons flutter dynamically behind, enhancing the sense of motion.

Due to social and historical developments, the Feitian imagery in Dunhuang murals declined from the Five Dynasties to the Yuan period. During this time, Feitian became overly secularized, losing the previous elegance and ethereal qualities, and the figures no longer conveyed the light, floating grace characteristic of celestial beings. Nevertheless, the “sense of flight” remains strong in these later murals, with meticulous and precise depiction of garments, ribbons, and body movement.

3.5. Feitian, Cave 3, Mogao Caves (Yuan Dynasty)



Figure 10. Feitian, Cave 3, Mogao Caves [11]

The mural above originates from Cave 3 of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang and dates back to the Yuan dynasty. At the centre of the composition is the Thousand-Armed and Thousand-Eyed Guanyin Bodhisattva, surrounded by attendants. In the top left and top right corners, two apsaras soar through the air. The overall composition is orderly and repetitive, and rich in detail. The palette is soft and elegant, dominated by gold, ochre and blue to create a solemn and mystical atmosphere. The lines are delicate and employ multiple traditional Chinese painting techniques, such as the iron-wire line, the orchid-leaf line and the dotted mouse-tail line. The strokes blend strength and softness, flowing with rhythmic harmony.

The sense of flight is conveyed primarily through the Feitian's dynamic posture and the flowing, airy garments. The Feitian in the upper-right corner has black double buns, each adorned with flowers, a high nose, large eyes, and a realistic facial depiction. The figure has a full, plump physique, bare upper body, a long skirt around the waist, and holds a lotus flower. The Feitian in the upper-left corner has golden double buns, similarly adorned with flowers, high nose and large eyes, and a faint smile. Both figures wear jewelry around the neck and arms, stand on auspicious clouds, and their ribbons flutter in wavy lines along the sides. Compared with previous periods, the auspicious clouds beside Yuan Feitian are somewhat less ethereal and light, resembling overlapping waves and giving a slightly heavier visual impression. However, the flowing movement of skirts and ribbons still clearly demonstrates the momentum of flight.

The Yuan dynasty Feitian show more diverse forms and body postures. The “S”-shaped curves are applied extensively in both body dynamics and the trailing ribbons, fully realizing the sense of flight. The compositions are rich in movement and rhythmic vitality.

3.6. Summary

From the Sixteen Kingdoms to the Yuan dynasty, the development of Feitian demonstrates that changes in imagery and the expression of flight momentum are not merely technical improvements but also visual reflections of social realities and cultural transformations in Chinese society. From the early solemn Buddhist representations of Gandharvas and Kinnaras to the joyous, ethereal Feitian of the Tang dynasty, each evolution responds to three key dimensions: the secularization of religious beliefs, innovations in dynamic aesthetic expression, and creative practice in Chinese

painting. The dynamic aesthetic embodied in Feitian has thus established a paradigmatic model for subsequent developments in Chinese art and visual culture.

4. A dynamic aesthetic study of the momentum of “flight”

The preceding sections have examined the development of winged figures and flying celestials, as well as their morphological evolution. They have also analysed the formal characteristics of these classical artistic representations across different historical periods, the techniques employed to convey the dynamic momentum of 'flight', and the aesthetic and cultural values they embody. By tracing the evolution of these visual symbols, we can see not only the transformations in artistic forms caused by technological innovation and changing aesthetic preferences, but also the consistent presence of Chinese dynamic aesthetics in the creation of 'flight' imagery. Whether in the rhythmic curls of the ribbons of feathered figures or the flowing robes of flying apsaras, an embodiment of the Eastern artistic ideal of 'vitality and spirit' lies. This aesthetic wisdom captures dynamic motion in an eternal moment, as seen in the interplay of solid and void in line drawings, the narrative flow of compositions, the interplay of light and shadow in colours, and the balanced harmony of strength and softness in postures. This section therefore focuses on exploring the dynamic aesthetic core of 'flight', revealing how Chinese artists convey its momentum through specific techniques: guiding movement with lines, creating dynamism with colour and generating resonance through spatial void. This reflects a unique understanding of life's rhythm, aesthetic experience and spiritual transcendence.

In Chinese mythology, the Yuren is a flying immortal, often depicted as bird-headed and human-bodied with wings. It embodies the ancient aspiration for freedom and a beautiful life, as well as the reverence for bird totems. The earliest description of the Yuren appears in the Shan Hai Jing: “The Feathered People dwell in the southeast. They have long heads and bodies covered in feathers.” Gang Gong observes: “Historical records show that the mythological Feathered People and deities of the Shan Hai Jing gradually evolved into immortals within the belief system of deities, first in the Chu Ci and later in the Lüshi Chunqiu. The Chu Ci · Yuan You states: 'Sending the Feathered People to Danqiu, keeping them in the old land of immortality.' Wang Yi's commentary in the Eastern Han dynasty notes: 'The Shan Hai Jing mentions a land of Feathered People, the undying populace; some say that those who attain the Dao grow feathers.' The Lüshi Chunqiu (Vol. 22) also mentions: 'Mount Jiuyang, where the Feathered People dwell, a land of immortals.'” [12] Thus, the Yuren became a symbolic immortal representing longevity in the human imagination. Since birth, humans have long been preoccupied with the theme of life and death. The aspiration to ascend as an immortal for longevity and eternal life reflects a fundamental desire to transcend mortality. Initially, this desire was purely focused on reverence for immortals and the hope for personal longevity. By the Han dynasty, the Yuren increasingly appeared in tomb murals, indicating a shift: people no longer feared death but hoped their souls would be guided by immortals to ascend after death. The pursuit evolved from “bodily immortality” to “soul preservation,” with the essential motivation rooted in the longing for the ideal of “flight.” Wings and feathers symbolized the ability to soar and achieve immortality, making the Yuren the ultimate spiritual guide for the soul.

During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, with the introduction of Buddhism and its interaction with Daoism, the meaning and form of the Yuren gradually transformed. Initially depicted as immortals capable of ascending to the sky, they later evolved into the Buddhist Feitian, representing celestial flight.

Although the Feitian images in Dunhuang murals evolved from the Yuren, their most essential distinction lies in the absence of wings and feathers. So why are Feitian still revered as immortals,

and how do they convey the momentum of “flight”? Lin Peiliang observes: “The Feitian in Dunhuang murals neither possess feathers nor wings, nor do they have halos above their heads. Even when standing on colorful clouds, they do not treat the clouds as a support, but instead dance gracefully, driven by flowing ribbons and garments.” [13] Compared with the Yuren, Feitian became more graceful and elegant in the middle and later stages of their development. Peng Zhang points out: “After the Buddhist Feitian imagery was transmitted from India to China, it naturally became an ideal vessel for the collective imagination of celestial flight in the Chinese psyche. Through the influence and integration of Chinese artistic culture, the Feitian image became increasingly idealized. Artists endowed Feitian with new vitality in both form and technique: early coarse physiques were abandoned in favor of slender, rounded bodies, more aligned with the Buddhist canonical ideal; in technique, curved lines were employed to convey motion, characterized by lightness, elegance, and rhythmic variation. These curves not only accentuate feminine beauty but also conform to Chinese cultural aesthetics. As a component of Buddhist art, Feitian not only possesses deep religious significance but also serves as an imaginative human ideal, satisfying the aspiration for transcendence. Feitian art thus represents a further elevation and sublimation of the ancient human aspiration for goodness and beauty, building on the Yuren.” [9] Jing Liu notes: “The Yuren is a continuation of traditional Chinese culture, while the Feitian emerged from the intersection of Indian Buddhist imagery and the indigenous Yuren of Chinese culture.” [1]

Together, the Han dynasty Yuren and the Feitian since the Sixteen Kingdoms period constitute a millennium-long pursuit of the ideal of “flight” in Chinese art. However, most existing studies have focused on the symbolic meaning of “flight” or on comparative analyses of Chinese and Western immortal imagery, with few systematically exploring how Chinese art achieves a unique expression of “flight” through different formal techniques and symbolic languages. This paper aims to fill that gap. Through an overview of the development and morphological evolution of Yuren and Feitian, the following innovative findings emerge:

First, the development and evolution of Yuren and Feitian reveal the Chinese artistic technique of “controlling with lines” for expressing dynamic momentum.

Whether in Yuren or Feitian, the lines used to shape figures varied across periods. In early Chinese art, line was the foundational element for shaping Yuren and conveying the momentum of “flight.” In Han dynasty stone reliefs, Yuren were outlined using firm, straight “iron-wire lines” (tiexianmiao), with repeated strokes at feathers, wings, and joints to emphasize key points. The wing lines on shoulders and backs typically curved backward, suggesting the direction of flight or imminent movement. Although simple, this linear technique could accurately convey the basic dynamics of flight, representing an early exploration of “controlling with lines” in Chinese art. From the Sixteen Kingdoms to the Yuan dynasty, Feitian were depicted with different line techniques, resulting in distinct characteristics. Scholars note: “In the early Dunhuang murals, namely the Northern Wei and Northern Liang periods, simple line drawing was the main technique. Significant differences existed between the two Wei dynasties, particularly in the use of color, producing distinct artistic effects. Northern Liang murals are full-bodied and bold, while Northern Wei murals are rounded and vigorous. The appearance of ‘defining lines’ in the Western Wei and Northern Zhou allowed for delicate modeling through the ‘Cao-yi-chu-shui’ technique, giving a gauzy aesthetic. In the Tang dynasty, dual-line techniques combined solid and void, balancing weight and lightness, creating vivid figures. In Yuan paintings, body contours often used iron-wire lines for a robust effect, while clothing employed folded reed lines (zhelumiao) to achieve sharp edges, and hair and eyebrows were drawn with fine lines for elegance. Despite the variety in line techniques, late Feitian figures often appeared rigid, suggesting a decline in artist skill.” [7]

Thus, different lines create different visual effects and even reflect the characteristics of different periods. Notably, in all periods, lines at the wings, feathers, garments, and ribbons are particularly forceful, using the tension of the line to convey momentum: straight lines suggest stability, angled lines imply change, and their combination gives a sense of “ready to fly” and the power to break free from stillness. Lines on garments and ribbons are generally delicate and soft, imparting a sense of light, dancing motion.

From an aesthetic perspective, 'line-driven motion' encapsulates China's distinctive appreciation of linear artistry. By skilfully manipulating lines, artists transform intangible movement into tangible visual forms, enabling viewers to experience artistic beauty and sense a transcendent spiritual force.

Furthermore, the evolution of jade figures and flying apsaras demonstrates China's artistic technique of 'creating momentum through colour'.

When crafting jade figures, colour carries rich symbolism and expressive power. Although the use of colour in Han dynasty relief stones was relatively simple, each hue held unique significance. For example, the figure's body in the Western Han period's Jade Figure Riding a Dragon (Fig. 3) is painted red, a colour that symbolised vitality, passion and auspiciousness at the time. Placed within the tomb chamber, this colouring expressed the hope of the tomb owner that the jade figure would assist their soul in ascending to heaven after death. Similarly, the jade figures depicted in the Eastern Han dynasty 'Yingchengzi tomb murals' (Fig. 4) predominantly feature white, a colour symbolising purity, sacredness and transcendence, reflecting reverence for the jade figures as guides for the soul's celestial journey.

In the flying apsaras of the Tang Dynasty, the use of 'flowing colours' captures the dynamic momentum of flight particularly masterfully. The ribbons draped over their shoulders and arms feature a colour gradient that fades from vermilion near the body to stone green at the ends, creating the visual effect of a gradual lightening. This gradient illusion makes the ribbons appear to flow continuously with the figures' movements, creating spatial depth and achieving the aesthetic effect of 'stillness within motion'. The figures and their motion are further emphasised by the sharp contrast between the colours of their garments and flowing ribbons and the background and the celestial beings' skin tones, with vivid reds, greens and other bright hues typically employed. This imbues the composition with vitality and dynamism, making the figures and their flying postures visually striking.

As a visual language, colour directly influences viewers' perceptions and emotional responses. Its application can also reflect the artist's state of mind during the creative process, or broader cultural or era-specific characteristics. Through colour contrast, key figures appear vivid and prominent. Therefore, using colour to create movement is an essential technique for enhancing compositions, emphasising focal points, and evoking emotional responses in audiences.

Thirdly, the development of winged figures and flying apsaras in Chinese art reveals the artistic technique of 'creating rhythm through space'.

Even in the earliest depictions of winged figures, the concept of space begins to emerge. Although most artworks were two-dimensional paintings or reliefs, artists created a sense of spatial depth through composition and layout. For example, in Han Dynasty stone reliefs, winged beings were usually positioned at the top centre of the composition, surrounded by clouds or other elements, while figures awaiting guidance were placed lower down. This created vertical and horizontal layers, establishing an ethereal atmosphere of celestial flight. These simple spatial arrangements enabled viewers to clearly understand the meaning and dynamism of flight.

In mural scenes, artists employed principles of spatial perspective, such as diminishing scale and varying clarity between near and distant objects, to portray flying apsaras dynamically across

different spatial planes. Apsaras in the foreground are depicted in great detail, with their garments, ribbons and bodily curves rendered in clear movement to convey a powerful sense of flight. Those in the distance appear smaller, with simpler forms and more subtle movements, suggesting distant activity. These spatial perspective techniques lend depth and realism to the scene, making it visually captivating.

Additionally, elements such as flowing clouds and scattered petals create a sense of movement and spatial depth. Celestial beings weave through the clouds, infusing the surrounding air currents with vitality as petals scatter along their flight paths. This interaction between the figures and their environment enriches the visual dynamism and rhythm, amplifying the resonance of spatiality and motion.

Generating resonance through emptiness is not merely about spatial arrangement; it is the pinnacle of dynamic expression in Chinese art. It embodies an aesthetic synthesis of space, movement and atmosphere. By transforming intangible concepts into tangible artistic forms, artists manifest the Chinese pursuit of dynamic beauty. This technique signifies a higher level of expression in the motion of the flying apsaras, standing as a testament to the wisdom of Chinese artistic practice.

5. Conclusion

From the winged figures of the Han dynasty to the flying apsaras of the Wei, Jin, Sui and Tang periods, the concept of 'flight' has consistently been used to express beauty and vitality in Chinese art. The artistic conception, characteristics and aesthetic features of flight have continuously evolved throughout history. The winged figures of the Han Dynasty constructed a bridge from the mortal realm to the celestial realm by employing fluid bodily movements, meticulously rendered feathers and compositions that juxtaposed humans with deities. They expressed humanity's yearning for soul immortality and transcendence, as well as reverence for the divine. This represented the religious dimension of the flying motif. During the Wei and Jin dynasties, flying apsaras adopted S-shaped curves and billowing robes, creating a spatial rhythm reminiscent of 'heavenly robes unfurling, filling the walls with wind'. The use of vivid colours and gracefully sinuous lines softened the solemnity of religious imagery, emphasising a spiritual celebration of life and freedom and an appreciation of human flourishing. During the Tang dynasty, flying apsaras underwent further secularisation. Through poised yet dynamic postures, vibrant colour palettes and group compositions, their kinetic aesthetics were heightened. During the prosperous Tang era, the flying motif evolved to celebrate human flourishing and cultural splendour, marking the transformation of the apsaras from purely religious figures to embodiments of the human spirit.

From an aesthetic perspective, the depiction of the dynamic momentum of flight in the form of feathered figures and flying apsaras embodies the philosophical pursuit in Chinese art of capturing both spirit and form. The rhythmic interplay of lines and the fluidity of colour transform the flight of these figures into a spiritual cadence. Through the interplay of solid and void, and the use of negative space, these tangible forms and movements transcend the material realm, elevating them to a pursuit of aesthetic experience and the perception of the Tao. From feathered beings to flying apsaras, the dynamic momentum of 'flight' represents an innovation in formal artistic language and a unique expression of Chinese culture's understanding of life, spiritual transcendence and the pursuit of kinetic aesthetics. It offers contemporary art a new aesthetic paradigm, conveying infinite artistic conception through finite forms.

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